

# Clarion

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE: TO ENCOURAGE, EDUCATE, ENGAGE, AND UNITE

## Giving Sermon Feedback



VOLUME 68 • NUMBER 4 • FEBRUARY 22, 2019

**THE DOOR TO THE PULPIT**  
**PROMOTING HOLINESS AND HOSPITALITY**

# Clarion

**Clarion: a trustworthy  
and engaging magazine,  
widely spread and read  
in Canadian Reformed  
households and beyond.**

To equip God's people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions, Clarion adheres to the following core values:

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## ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

CLARION  
Premier Printing Ltd.  
One Beghin Avenue  
Winnipeg, MB Canada R2J 3X5  
Phone: 204-663-9000, Fax: 204-663-9202

**Subscriptions** subscriptions@clarionmagazine.ca  
**Advertisements** ads@clarionmagazine.ca  
**Website** www.clarionmagazine.ca

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			Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada			\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds			\$69.00	\$102.00
International			\$98.00	\$171.00

\*Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra.  
GST/HST no. 890967359RT

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Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd.  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support  
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Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Issue 4 begins with our lead article from Rev. Peter Holtvliwer, "Sermon Feedback." As the title implies, he writes about receiving feedback on sermons – how feedback is appreciated and can be very upbuilding. There are also some helpful tips on how to communicate feedback to your pastor.

In this issue and the following one, our magazine brings readers an article exchange between Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Bill De Jong. In our first section, these men are focussing on "Pulpit and Table: Promoting Holiness and Hospitality." They have each prepared an article as well as a response to the other's article. Stay tuned for the next half in Issue 5.

Rev. Rob Schouten continues his four-part series, "Is Scripture Enough" with his third installment. Treasures, New & Old, Church News Review, Clippings on Politics & Religion, Clarion Kids, and Ray of Sunshine are all included in this issue, as well as a letter to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

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he is currently tweeting on  
Christ in the Psalms.

# Sermon Feedback

*When you then approach the pastor, be prepared for a discussion and to explain what you mean*

Listening to sermons is something we all do. We love the Lord and we love to hear him speak to us through the message our minister will bring each Lord's Day. Besides that, the Holy Spirit uses the preaching to work faith in our hearts and to mature us in that faith. As we sit under the preaching with listening ears, we are affected and changed. Sometimes we are moved powerfully in the moment, but perhaps most often our faith is nourished slowly but surely sermon by sermon, like getting well-fed meal by meal. Because we care a great deal about God's Word, we sometimes feel like saying something to the minister about his sermon, but how do we go about that? Do ministers even want or appreciate feedback? And what about if I have concerns or criticisms?

## Encouragement

Speaking as a minister, I can assure you that encouragement of any kind is always appreciated by pastors. It might seem like your pastor has it all together, is confident in his work, and has no need to be assured that the Lord is using his preaching to good effect, but that's just a smoke-screen. Most preachers are looking for signs that the preaching is landing, that it is coming across in an understandable way, that it touches the heart, and strengthens trust in Christ. Everyone recognizes that the credit for this belongs only to the Holy Spirit and yet the minister – as the Spirit's instrument – plays an integral role in this. He wants to know: am I being an effective instrument of the Spirit or am I getting in the way of the message? Am I helping to build up faith or am I an obstacle?

A pastor intent on building up the congregation will always be asking these questions of himself. There's a certain amount of second-guessing yourself that goes on, especially in the early years of the pastorate. How refreshing it is, then, for your minister to hear from listeners that the sermons

are being a blessing! For him to get a positive comment after church or to hear a brief word of appreciation helps put those inner questions and self-doubts to rest. While I'm sure we'll all be careful not to inflate the preacher's ego (and the preacher needs to constantly be on guard for that too!), yet a well-timed commendation for good, faithful work is a welcome encouragement.

Commending a faithful servant for a job well-done is quite in line with the example of Scripture. For example, the Lord Jesus urges us to diligently work *now* by teaching us to expect praise and reward from him *later*, when he returns. Don't we all hope for and long to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21)? And expressing appreciation for faithful labour is not limited to Christ nor does it need to wait until his return, as the apostle Paul shows in a number of his letters. While Paul is careful to direct thanks to God for the good things he sees in God's people, at the same time he makes a point of telling the people what he finds so praise-worthy about them. The Philippians are commended for their "partnership in the gospel" with Paul (Phil 1:5) and for their constant obedience (2:12). In this same letter, Timothy is lauded for his great concern for the church in Philippi and his selflessness (2:19-22) while Epaphroditus is described as Paul's "fellow worker and fellow soldier," as one who risked his life in the work of Christ (2:25-30). Paul similarly commends the Colossians (Col 1:1-14) and the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:1-10). With these examples in mind, an email or text to your pastor thanking God for the particular benefits observed or received in his preaching is completely appropriate and will be a real boost.

## Constructive feedback

But what if you would like to say more? What if you not only want to let your pastor know how you've been touched

by the preaching but also want to give him some comments that might be a help to his ongoing sermon work? For example, in your place of employment you might see a fellow employee doing a good job and say that to him. Yet you can also see ways that he could do his job even better and with a few well-chosen words you point him in that direction. You are positive but also instructive. Would something like that be appreciated by your minister?

Yes. At least it should be. A minister of the gospel needs to be humble and willing to grow and learn in his craft of preaching and so he should always have an open ear for well-meant, up-building suggestions. When a listener is himself humble and comes with sensitivity, knowing that the minister has trained a long time for his work and puts his heart and soul into it each week, ideas for improvement will be

*Most preachers are looking for signs that the preaching is landing, that it is coming across in an understandable way, that it touches the heart, and strengthens trust in Christ*

welcome. Keen, godly listeners can help a minister understand not only how the messages are being received but which particular aspects of the preaching are helpful, which may be less so, and other points which could be considered to potentially make the preaching that much more effective.

### Be specific

For example, I once had a senior brother comment how he appreciated the longer pauses I had in a particular sermon. When I asked why, he explained that “us older people don’t hear so well anymore. We need time to catch up with what you’ve been saying.” He went on to talk about the value of a slower pace in the preaching so those with hearing or concentration issues (generally the very young and the seniors) can have a better chance to take it all in. Preaching too fast tends to go over their heads. The comments were given with obvious respect and affection. What was my response? *This was excellent feedback!* Before that I had not fully realized the benefits of both a slower rate of preaching and the pregnant pauses, and since then I’ve been more deliberate in both.

If you genuinely would like to help your minister develop his preaching abilities, the most beneficial thing you can do is to come with specific suggestions for improvement. Then the minister can go to work with them. To help him understand what you mean, it will be quite useful to come with examples of what is working well and then what can be improved and how to go about it. It may be wise to try out your suggestion on your spouse or a close friend to see if it makes sense, and whether they agree that it would be beneficial for the minister to hear it from you.

When you then approach the pastor, be prepared for a discussion and to explain what you mean as the minister may well not have thought of it before. He will be keen to understand. If you anticipate the conversation being longer or more in-depth than the casual interactions that happen in the foyer after church, consider visiting the preacher later in the week. He may be more prepared for suggestions a few days later when he’s not so emotionally attached to the sermon he just delivered! Keeping in mind the goal to build up and bless your pastor in this work, offer to pray with your pastor specifically about his preaching work. It may surprise you, but there are very few people who sit and *pray with and for the minister* particularly. But when it is done it not only strengthens the pastor, it helps unite the two parties closer together in Christian love.

### Serious concerns

So far, I’ve mentioned situations where the sermons are being well-received. But what about when there is criticism? What if you hear things which concern you, things you think are unwise, imbalanced, or even unscriptural? How could you go about bringing that up with the pastor in an appropriate and productive manner?

The first thing I would suggest is to wait a few days and let both your emotions and those of your minister subside. Preaching is a very intense thing. With apologies to the ladies, it’s somewhat like giving birth. All week you’ve been pondering the text and thinking about how to communicate its message. You’ve prayed over it, sweated over it, pulled it all together and then on Sunday you’ve laboured to get it out to God’s people with as much conviction as you can muster in the hope that it will do them some good. In other words, the minister’s adrenaline is pumping and he feels very attached to that “baby” he just birthed – so right after church wouldn’t be a good time to come with your criticism!

## Check your emotions

Similarly, as a listener, your own emotions could be very volatile when hearing things you believe to be skewed in one way or another. It's upsetting to have your pastor present things which appear to go against what we confess and/or what the Bible teaches, or which seem to be slanted toward error or the like. If you talk to the minister right after church in that condition, chances are it will quickly become a hurtful confrontation, not a helpful conversation. It's much better to wait a few days. Talk your concern over with your spouse or a good friend to see if they heard what you heard, to test whether your concerns are really valid. It could be that you see things differently in a couple of days or realize it's not really an issue that needs to be addressed. If so, then let it be. Peace between brothers and peace in the church is too precious to risk over small matters. Pray both for yourself (for a spirit of true and gracious discernment) and your minister (for faithfulness in his work and a willingness to hear your concern and take it seriously).

If you find that you do still have concerns that you'd like to take up with the minister, a helpful thing to do will be to write down what the issue is as you see it so that you can present it to your pastor with precision and clarity.<sup>1</sup> It will give you something to refer to and stay focussed on. If at all possible, discuss the matter in person and not via text, email, or even the phone. So much of our communication is lost in those media (like tone of voice, facial expression, the

look in the eye, body language, etc.) that we can easily misunderstand each other and make matters worse. A face-to-face meeting that begins with prayer will be the most helpful to both get across your concern, have it understood and hopefully properly addressed, and then to part on good terms as siblings in Christ. For myself I have made it a rule never to engage in disagreements, debates, or arguments on social media but to have potentially difficult discussions in person.

Preachers preach to be heard. They want their hearers to benefit from their work, to mature in faith and grow in godliness, under the Lord's blessing. Listeners want the same thing. With that in mind, your prayers, words of encouragement, constructive feedback, and legitimate, serious concerns will all be very useful and appreciated by your pastor.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that a person couldn't speak with the elders about the preaching at any point along the way. In a healthy situation, when concerns first arise, it will be best to try and dialogue with the minister in the hope to gain understanding and clear up the matter. However, when things become tense or difficulties persist, it may make more sense to speak with the elders or at least involve them in the discussion. Preaching is a public matter that is overseen by the elders, so it is their duty to discern whether the preaching is pure and edifying or not. In principle, any member is free to discuss the edification of the sermons with the elders at any time. Being concerned with the preaching is not a Matthew 18 situation that would require a person to go through the series of steps outlined there. For more on that, see my editorial "Misusing Matthew 18" in *Clarion*, Volume 65, April 8, 2016.





# A Doorkeeper

***"For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness."***  
 (Psalm 84:10)

Psalm 84 is a psalm of the Sons of Korah. Dr. John Smith, speaking on this psalm some years ago at a CRTS graduation evening, reminded us of the story of Korah.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Korah is told in Numbers 16. Korah, together with Dathan and Abiram, rebelled against Moses and Aaron when Israel was in the wilderness. Korah belonged to the tribe of Levi. It was the task of the Levites to take care of the tabernacle.

Each Levitical clan had a task to perform: chopping wood, drawing water, opening and closing doors, etc. The clan of Aaron were the priests, who brought the sacrifices and burned the incense. At some point Korah objected to this. He said to Moses that it was not fair that only some of the Levites got to be priests. He wanted to be a priest too.

Moses asked him if it was not enough that God had put him and other Levites in charge of the tabernacle. By wanting to fulfil a task that God had given to someone else, he was rebelling against God. As punishment the LORD made the earth open up beneath Korah, the other rebels, and their families, and they were swallowed up alive.

So very interestingly, Numbers 26:11 says, *"The line of Korah, however, did not die out."* The Lord, in his grace and kindness, had not brought a complete end to Korah's family line. Some of his children survived their father's rebellion and continued to serve the LORD at the tabernacle.

Also interestingly, much later, King David made the sons of Korah doorkeepers (1 Chron 26). The doorkeepers were responsible for opening the doors of the tabernacle, later the temple, and of making sure that only those who were qualified would enter the holy place.

We see some wonderful irony here: Korah had said, "Let me in!" He had tried to push his way through to do the task God had given to others. Now the sons of Korah were given the task of making sure that no one tried to do what their father had done.


These sons of Korah said, "Better to be a doorkeeper in the in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

Can you say that? That it is better to be the most humble servant of God's household than to live the life of the rebel?

You know, sometimes the tents of sin seem more appealing than the courts of the Lord. Sometimes it seems that non-Christians have all the fun while the Christian life is boring. Don't be fooled by that. It is a broad path – to destruction. Everything you see around you is going to disappear. The form of this world is passing away. The tents of wickedness and sin are going to shrivel up and disappear. We, however, will live forever, either in heaven or in hell.

And whether heaven or hell is our final and everlasting destiny depends upon whether or not we love Jesus. Better to be on the path to Zion than the highway to hell.

Ensure that you believe in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you may know that the Lord will withhold no good thing from you. May the sunshine of God's radiant face shine upon you. May Jesus be your shield to protect you. Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> "A Doorkeeper in the House of My God," *Clarion* Vol. 61, No. 23 (2012), p. 572ff. 

## For further study

1. According to Mark 13:34, what must the doorkeeper be?
2. What task has the Lord given you to perform in the congregation?



# Is Scripture Enough? (Part 3)

In the previous installment, we examined problems inherent in what the Catholic church teaches about tradition. We also saw that Scripture does not indicate a growing and developing tradition, but instead points the church to the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) by the writers of Holy Scripture. In today’s installment, we will consider what Holy Scripture says about the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. We will also see that what the Catholic church teaches about tradition is not itself in keeping with tradition!

## The benefits of written Scripture

As history shows, dependence on an “oral tradition” leaves the church vulnerable to all sorts of distortions to the gospel, whether by addition or subtraction. In the end, there is no check on oral tradition. The Catholic church can claim whatever it wishes as part of the unwritten apostolic tradition. Whenever necessary, the claim of “unwritten tradition” can be trotted out to defend a variety of practices and beliefs of which there is not so much as a hint in the writings of the New Testament and which in fact, as noted in the previous installment, frequently contradict what is written.

In the Bible, there is a strong emphasis on God’s *written* Word (see, for instance, Exod 24:4, Deut 31:26; Josh 24:25-26). As we read in Article 3 of the Belgic Confession, “In his special care for us and our salvation, God commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit his revealed Word to *writing* and he himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”

Unlike oral tradition, what is written is permanent. It has stability over time. Because they are publicly available, the written Scriptures function as a clear norm for doctrine and life. In contrast, even after many centuries, the actual content of the oral tradition claimed by the Catholic church remains vague. One might think that after such a long time

the content of the “unwritten traditions” would have been clarified and codified. Instead, the content remains conveniently mysterious. Indeed, over time, all sorts of new truths are wondrously discovered in the tradition of which previous generations of Christians were completely unaware.

In reality, oral tradition is notoriously unreliable, the stuff of which legends and myths are created. Instead of communicating God’s truth, it ends up frequently communicating human ideas which lead people away from the good news of the gospel (see Matt 15:3, 6, Col 2:8). Far from being infallible, as claimed by Catholicism, tradition must always be subject to correction by the written Scriptures.

## Scripture on *Sola Scriptura*

Does Scripture teach the sufficiency of Scripture? Or, as many Catholics suggest, is the principle of *sola Scriptura* itself contrary to Scripture? As already noted, the Bible contains solemn warnings “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6; see also Deut 4:2, Prov 30:6, Rev 22:18-19). Such warnings flow from the special nature of the Scripture as the Spirit-given revelation of God. Scripture is uniquely authoritative because it comes to us directly from God.

The classic text pertaining to the inspiration of the Bible is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where Paul writes: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Close reading of this text makes clear to us that not only is Scripture inspired, but it is also sufficient! When people have Scripture, says Paul, they have everything they need to become “complete, equipped for every good work.” To be “complete,” one needs Scripture alone. Tradition is not necessary to reach the goal of maturity in Christ.

Because Scripture alone is the inspired Word of God, it is also the final court of appeal for all matters of Christian doctrine and life. If something cannot be substantiated from

Scripture, whether by direct teaching or by implication, it cannot be binding on the conscience of the people of God. When the Lord Jesus and the apostles needed to settle a matter, they didn't say, "Consider the tradition." Instead, it was always enough for them to say, "It is written." Variations of that saying occur at least ninety times in the New Testament. Instead of elevating tradition, the inspired writers of Scripture frequently warn against giving it too much significance.

In general, Catholic approaches to the question of spiritual authority in the church don't give sufficient emphasis to the "once-for-all" character of God's revealed Word. There is no indication in the New Testament that in the time beyond the apostolic age, the church is to be guided by a growing body of tradition. Instead, the constant emphasis of the New Testament is that the church in coming days must hold fast "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Far from adding to what Christ and the apostles had communicated, the task at hand for the next generation was to stick to the "good deposit" (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) and to maintain the "pattern of sound words" (2 Tim 1:13-14) which had been entrusted to the church. The only place to find this "good deposit" is in Scripture itself.

## Tradition on tradition

A very significant problem for Catholics is the view of tradition in the early Christian church. When we read writers of the post-apostolic age, we don't find them making any appeal to unwritten traditions, at least not to establish any Christian doctrines.

For instance, when Athanasius in the fourth century is engaged in tremendous theological struggle against Arius, his arguments flow from Scripture and not from anything besides Scripture. There is simply no hint here of an "oral tradition" apart from the Bible itself. In fact, Athanasius wrote: "For indeed the holy and God-breathed Scriptures are *self-sufficient* for the preaching of the truth." Athanasius realized that the case against Arius had to be established on the basis of the Bible alone.

Though Augustine is sometimes mentioned as an example of a church father who to some degree promoted the notion of extra-biblical tradition, on several occasions he stated quite definitively that matters of dispute in the church are settled in only one way: by appeal to Scripture.

Here are few citations from Augustine: "Neither dare one agree with catholic bishops if by chance they err in anything, *with the result that their opinion is against the canonical Scriptures of God.*"

And this: "Whatever they may adduce, and whatever they may quote from, let us rather, if we are his sheep, hear the voice of our Shepherd. *Therefore, let us search for the truth in the canonical Scriptures.*"

And finally: "Let those things be removed from our midst which we quote against each other not from the canonical books but from elsewhere. Someone may perhaps ask: 'Why do you want to remove these things from the midst?' *Because I do not want the holy church proved by human documents but by divine oracles.*"

From these quotations, it's quite clear that whatever importance Augustine saw in tradition, it was not on the same level as Scripture. For the establishment of norms for doctrine and life, there was only one place to go – to the very words of God!

For one more reference, we can consider how Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century told his adult catechism students that if he were to present any teaching to them which could not be validated from Scripture, they were to reject it.

Summarizing the approach to tradition in the early Christian church, J.N.D. Kelly, a well-known church historian, writes: "The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by Scripture is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the Father, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to exposition of the Bible. Further, it was taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had to first establish its Scriptural basis."<sup>2</sup>

From the above, it seems that the real problem of the Catholic church is that it is not sufficiently catholic. Instead of communicating a truly catholic (universal) view of Scripture and tradition, it holds fast to concepts found neither in Scripture nor in the early Christian church, but which came to prominence only in the late medieval period (1100-1500). Absolutizing a medieval viewpoint does not seem in any way genuinely catholic. Far from being rebels, the Reformers wish to steer the church back to her roots in the New Testament and in the early fathers. It is legitimate to defend the Reformation as being more catholic than the Catholic church.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These citations from Athanasius and Augustine are taken from James White, "Sola Scriptura and the Early Church" as found in Kistler, pages 27-62.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly, J.N.D., *Early Christian Doctrines* (Prince Press, 1960, 2004), pg. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Worth mentioning here is the definition of Dr. J. Faber: "Catholic is the faith that has been believed everywhere, always, by all, in accordance with the Holy Scriptures." See *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Inheritance Publications, 1990), pg. 91. Faber refers his readers to definitions of catholicity in the early Christian church, including that of Vincent of Lerins who in the year 434 stated that catholic is that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all (page 90). By these definitions, Roman Catholic concepts of Tradition are not truly catholic but are instead idiosyncratic.



## Editorial Comment

As our readers will know there has been some interaction recently in this magazine between the Rev. Dr. Bill DeJong and Prof. Dr. Jason Van Vliet. After some discussion both brothers were of the opinion that some more in-depth attention should be given to the matter. As a result, they agreed to an article exchange with the topics being: "Pulpit and Table: Promoting Holiness and Hospitality" and "Pulpit and Table: The Limits of Exclusion and Embrace." Here follows the first instalment.

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# The Door to the Pulpit

Jealousy for the pulpit is no vice. The pulpit, after all, is the space where the Word of God is opened and where the Son of God is preached, and if the Word of God is misunderstood and misapplied and if the Son of God is misrepresented, the mission of the church is compromised and, worse, the name of Christ is publicly tarnished. The church ought to exercise no charity to those who peddle a false gospel.

In the tradition of the Canadian Reformed churches, godly jealousy for the pulpit is apparent in the strictures on access to the pulpit. No one can obtain a license to preach in the federation of churches apart from classical permission, and no one can be ordained to ministry without undergoing a series of intensive classical examinations. If the bar is set high for those who wish to practice law or medicine, why should it not be set high for those desirous of being officially ordained ambassadors for Christ?

## An exceptional story

Many readers of *Clarion* know that Blessings Christian Church (hereafter, BCC), where I serve as a pastor, permitted the retiring pastor of the Stanley Avenue Baptist church (hereafter, SABC) to preach in one of its services. This decision has been misinterpreted by some to imply that BCC permits Baptists to preach from its pulpit. BCC has made no such decision, and therefore I'm happy to use this space not simply to reaffirm that point, but to retell the wonderful story.

In its quest to locate a suitable venue for worship, BCC entered into a dialogue with SABC about the prospect of renting its beautiful facilities. That dialogue progressed so well that SABC, in a display of exceptional hospitality and generosity, offered its building to BCC for its worship services and expressed a desire and intent to join BCC for worship. This is precisely what happened and, in one Sunday, our gathering for Sunday morning worship grew considerably by the addition of delightful, mostly elderly Baptist saints.

One reason the relationship between the two churches formed as well as it did is because of the warm and thick collegiality between the retiring pastor of SABC and the pastors of BCC. Our numerous dialogues not only generated mutual respect, but revealed a common commitment to the gospel, to the mission of the church, and to the so-called "doctrines of grace."

Given the fact that the SABC pastor was soon to retire and relocate elsewhere and that his congregation would no longer have opportunity to hear him preach again, BCC decided to open the door to the pulpit and invite him to preach to the congregation he loved and had served for years and to us, his newfound brothers and sisters in Christ. Before reaching this decision we at BCC studied the Church Order carefully and discovered, as many others have now, that there is nothing in the church order preventing a church

from granting a local (rather than federal) license to preach. We are thankful we made that decision and we were amply blessed by the preaching of SABC's now retired pastor!

## Learning to love the Baptists

Will BCC invite a Baptist, godly in life and Reformed in doctrine, to preach again? There are presently no plans, but if the opportunity arises, I hope we will give it serious consideration. This might puzzle the reader. Aren't the Anabaptists guilty of heresy for denying the incarnation (BC, Art 18), erroneous for insisting on rebaptizing those baptized as infants (BC, Art 34), and condemnable for their seditious rejection of human government (BC, Art 36)?

Here we must follow the sage advice of the Heidelberg Catechism "in not condemning or joining in condemning anyone rashly and unheard" (LD 43, Q/A 112). The Anabaptists today (often compliant citizens and eager adherents of the doctrine of the incarnation) are unlike the Anabaptists then and the Baptists are significantly unlike both. If one studies the history of Baptist churches, one discovers that they were often founded not by those in the Anabaptistic tradition but by disenfranchised Presbyterians, for instance, or by Anglicans.

By the grace of God, there is today an entire demographic of Christian believers for which there is no exact parallel at the time of the Reformation – namely, gospel-oriented, faithful Baptists who agree with us on just about every single doctrinal issue except infant baptism (and the hermeneutics infant baptism implies). This claim, once suspect, is now so widely embraced in the Canadian Reformed churches today that for many it sounds platitudinous. It is not insignificant that a considerable percentage of textbooks used and recommended at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary are authored by Baptists (e.g., Norman Geisler, Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, etc.). Moreover, it is meaningful that so many members in Canadian Reformed churches are fed and encouraged by sound Baptist pastors whose teaching and preaching are sought and valued. Whereas Canadian Reformed folk in the past would limit their diet to Klaas Schilder, Benne Holwerda, and then Jelle Faber and Clarence Stam, many today are being fed by Alistair Begg, John MacArthur, John Piper, and Matt Chandler.

## Is something being lost?

Some will attribute this trend, i.e., the reception of (Reformed) Baptist preachers into our hearts and homes, to the demise of doctrinal commitment within the Reformed churches. Critics will allege that the doctrine of infant bap-

tism, once prized as a non-negotiable doctrine, is now relegated to the periphery, so much so that he who denies it is no longer denied by us.

But is there another way of seeing this? What really is being lost? The fact that Baptist preachers have elicited interest from those catechized in Reformed churches underscores a remarkable movement among many such preachers to an increasingly Reformed worldview. What is being lost is what is being shed by these Baptist preachers – namely, the Arminianism, the individualism, the culture-denying pietism, the Zwinglian view of sacraments, and the moralistic preaching that once characterized many Baptist churches.

What is being gained by these beloved Baptist preachers is a Reformed hermeneutic in which continuity between old and new covenant is increasingly affirmed and in which Christ is seen and preached, even from Old Testament narratives. What is being gained by these Baptist preachers is a Reformed worldview in which the world is being embraced not simply as the damned realm from which sinners must be rescued, but as God's creation which he intends to renovate and as an orbit in which political involvement and cultural participation are encouraged.

Given the popularity of these (Reformed) Baptist preachers, what is being lost among us? What is being lost is the unwarranted suspicion towards Christians that defies the trust that ought to be embedded in sincere Christian love (1 Cor 13:7) and the sectarianism with which Reformed Christians have sometimes misjudged others and secluded themselves. What is being lost is the sometimes abstract and purely doctrinal view of the Christian life, and the occasional devaluing of personal conversion and a personal relationship with Christ.

## But what about infant baptism?

Growing in respect for, and admiration of, godly and sound Baptists is one thing, but isn't infant baptism still a distinguishing mark of the Reformed church? My roommate for four years was a Baptist (now a faithful Baptist pastor in Cambridge, ON) and I've read a fair amount of literature by Baptists. As much as I love the Baptists and have learned from them, I remain stubbornly convinced of infant baptism. Moreover, my conviction about infant baptism over the years has grown, not shrunk.

Is it possible, however, to fraternize and collaborate with Christians with whom we disagree about something substantial? I'm grateful John Calvin did not close the door on Lutherans for their distorted view of the sacraments. I'm grateful Klaas Schilder did not close the door on the

Kuyperians for their view of presumptive regeneration. For that matter, I'm glad that the apostle Paul did not close the door on Peter for his distorted view of table fellowship (see Gal 2:11ff.). "The most excellent teachers of the Church," the Second Helvetic Confession wisely teaches, "have differed among themselves about important matters without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church because of these contentions. For thus it pleases God to use the dissensions that arise in the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest" (Ch 17).

## Showing Baptist preachers the door

Jealousy for the pulpit is no vice. A sectarian refusal to recognize faithful believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, however, is. I think we in our federation should consider, much like our brothers and sisters in the Free Reformed and United Reformed churches have, whether there's a place for having sound and godly (Reformed) Baptists preach on occasion. Personally, I favour showing (Reformed) Baptists the door, and saying, "Here, let me open that for you. I'm eager to hear you preach the gospel to me."



## Response to Dr. Bill De Jong

I express my appreciation that Dr. De Jong clearly explains his view on this topic. Allow me to respond briefly.

### Anabaptists and Baptists

There are historical and doctrinal differences between European Anabaptists of the sixteenth century and North American Baptists in the twentieth century. For example, some, but not all, Anabaptists denied the incarnation (BC, Art 18). Most, if not all, Baptists today will fervently defend the incarnation.

But all of this does not change the main issue we're discussing. Both Anabaptists and Baptists "condemn the baptism of the little children of believers" (BC, Art 34). In our Belgic Confession we agree that this is a doctrinal "error." And office bearers in the Canadian Reformed churches have solemnly subscribed to "oppose, refute and help prevent such errors" (Form of Subscription).

Other topics, such as what can we learn from Baptists, are worthy of discussion, but we need to focus on the main issue.

### Books, speeches, and the pulpit

The thrust of Dr. De Jong's argument seems to be this: if we can profit from books and conference speeches by Baptist preachers, why can't we have such a man on our pulpit, at least occasionally, and be edified in that way also? The answer lies in the opening paragraphs of his article. In the pulpit a man stands not as an author and not merely as a public speaker, but as an officially ordained *ambassador* of God. Therefore, if this man's doctrinal views deviate from the Word of this God in such a serious way that we,

as churches, feel compelled to speak up publicly in our confession and call his views an "error," then out of respect for the God of all truth, we say, "You are most welcome to listen from the pew but not to preach from the pulpit."

### URCNA & FRCNA

Dr. De Jong reports that, on occasion, Baptist preachers have preached on URC and FRC pulpits. He then suggests, if they can do it, why can't the CanRC? The URC church order speaks of "occasional pulpit exchanges" (Art 34). Similarly, the FRC church order refers to "visiting ministers" on a "one-time basis" (Art 5.J.4). Strikingly, though, in these articles their respective church orders speak about "faithful allegiance" or "fully subscribing" to the "Three Forms of Unity" for this to take place. *That* is the point: these churches agree to use the *same confessional standard* for an occasional preacher as they would for their own regular preachers.

Dr. De Jong concludes by saying he personally favours showing (Reformed) Baptist preachers the door to the pulpit and saying, "Here, let me open that for you." I respectfully submit that as local consistories we are obliged to use a *consistent confessional standard* for all preachers in our pulpits. If a man cannot, in good conscience, agree to the biblical truths we confess together in Lord's Day 27 and Belgic Confession Article 34, then we must say, "Please understand that we do this out of love for our Lord and for you, but we cannot open the door of the pulpit for you. Instead, if you would like, we would certainly be willing to help you understand how integral and beautiful household baptism is within God's sovereignly gracious work of redemption."

Jason Van Vliet



# Promoting Holiness and Hospitality: The Pulpit

Back in the November 2, 2018 issue of *Clarion*, Dr. Bill De Jong and I exchanged questions and comments about the fact that the Blessings congregation in Hamilton, of which he is a co-pastor, opened their pulpit to a Baptist minister. Dr. De Jong voiced his concern that I may be failing to distinguish sufficiently between error and heresy. In my understanding he was saying that if this particular minister held to a *heresy*, he would not have been admitted to Blessings' pulpit; however, since he held to an *error*, and also understood that he should not speak about this error from the pulpit, it was acceptable for the consistory to welcome him to the pulpit. This topic certainly seems worthy of further discussion.

## Defining the issue

So, what exactly are we speaking about? Theologians do sometimes distinguish between points of doctrine that are closer to the core of our faith and those that are not so central. Different words are used to describe this distinction: essential and non-essential articles of faith, fundamental and non-fundamental articles, or even first-order and second-order doctrines. It is commonly said that the essential articles of faith refer to truths such as our Triune God, the incarnation, and salvation by grace alone, while non-essential articles include doctrines such as the sacraments or the last things, also called eschatology. To deny a fundamental article of the faith is heresy; to reject a non-fundamental one is error.

Theologians may speak like this, but how do Scripture and our confessions refer to heresy and error? How should we deal with heresy and error, especially regarding admission to the pulpit? And how do we combine our calling, as church, to uphold the entire truth of Scripture and to be a welcoming community of believers?

## Scripture

*Error* is a common word in Scripture. It can refer to moral error (Rom 1:27), ceremonial error (2 Sam 6:7), or doctrinal error (1 John 4:6). Closely related to this, the Holy Spirit also speaks about teachers, prophets, and apostles who promoted false doctrines (e.g., Matt 7:15; 2 Cor 11:13; 2 Pet 2:1). In other words, *error* is a broad category that covers a lot of different falsehoods and transgressions.

Yet what makes an error so wrong? It's not just that someone makes a theological mistake, like getting a problem wrong on a math test. No, there is something more at stake: either in whole or part, the God of all truth is being misrepresented by the one committing the error. *That* is what makes it serious. Error stands opposed not only to the truth but also to the Spirit of God, who reveals that truth (1 John 4:1-6).

The word *heresy* is far less common in the Bible. In fact, in our English translations we only find it in one place, 2 Peter 2:1, where we read about false teachers who secretly bring in "destructive heresies." It refers to a particular group of people who hold to a distinctive set of teachings that are not in agreement with God's Word.

Simply put, Scripture does not speak of two clear categories: heresies and errors. Moreover, we certainly do not find any lists suggesting which falsehoods belong in which category. Neither do we find an indication that *heresy*, which is only used once, is a more serious kind of error. So, in certain contexts theologians may find it helpful to use a heresy-error distinction, but let's be clear that such a distinction is not explicitly found in, nor required by, God's own Word.

## Confessions

Looking through our Three Forms of Unity we find that *heresy* is used to describe those who deny the Trinity, like

Marcion (BC, Art 9), the incarnation, like some Anabaptists (BC, Art 18), and original sin, like Pelagius (CD, III/IV 10).

Next, *errors* include those who deny the creation of angels and demons, like the Sadducees and Manichees (BC, Art 12), the providence of God, like Epicureans (BC, Art 13), infant baptism, like the Anabaptists (BC, Art 34), unconditional election, insuperable grace, and perseverance of the saints, like the Arminians (CD, Rejection of Errors), and original sin, like Pelagius (CD, II, RE 3).

We do well to note that our confessions label Pelagianism as both a heresy and an error. At a minimum, then, we should not be too rigid about placing wrong teachings in one category or another. Furthermore, while *heresy* is used to describe false teachings that are at the core of our faith, such as the Trinity and the incarnation, so does the word *error*. Denying that God upholds and governs all things, like Epicureans did in centuries past and open theists do today, is definitely not a minor theological blunder. It strikes at the very heart of who our God is. All this to say that by using the word *error*, our confessions are not suggesting that the wrong teaching is, by definition, some kind of lesser fault.

## Dealing with heresy and error

Still, when we are speaking to people it can be helpful to distinguish between *heresy* and *error*, as some theologians do. Obviously, we are going to have a different kind of conversation with a Jehovah's Witness, who denies the divinity of our Saviour, than we will with a Reformed Baptist, who cherishes the sovereignty of God's grace.

Yet whatever differences filter into our conversations, every communicant member in our churches has still made exactly the same vow to reject "*all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word*" (Form for Public Profession of Faith; emphasis mine).

In addition, office bearers have taken an additional vow to "*reject all errors conflicting with the doctrine expressed in these confessions [referring to the Three Forms of Unity] and. . . to oppose, refute and help prevent such errors*" (Form for Subscription; emphasis mine). Again, even though the Belgic Confession labels believers-only baptism as an *error*, not a *heresy*, that does not change the bottom line that we have vowed before our God – and office bearers even doubly so – to reject this error. And do we really reject this error by opening our pulpit to someone who is publicly known to hold such an error? No, that would be a contradiction.

## Differing weights and measures

However, what if a guest preacher, who is Baptist, fully understands that, while he is on a Reformed pulpit, he will not say anything to undermine the teaching of infant baptism? Wouldn't that be sufficient, especially since he's only a guest?

At first glance we might be inclined to agree with that line of thinking. After all, such a preacher may well deliver a great, scripturally-sound, gospel-centred sermon, and everyone goes home very edified. However, there are some verses in the Bible that compel us to give this a sober, second thought. In Proverbs 20:10 the Holy Spirit reminds us, "Unequal weights and unequal measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord" (see also 16:11; 20:23).

In our federation of churches, whenever we admit a man to the pulpit we specifically ask him whether he agrees, from the heart, with "the whole doctrine" contained in our confessions, the Three Forms of Unity, as a faithful summary of God's Word. Time and again, we use this standard, or measure, in our local congregations and our broader assemblies (CO, Art 26). Following due process, if the preacher agrees from the heart, the pulpit is open; if he does not, the pulpit is not open.

Now, if we start using a different measure for *guest* preachers, we might suppose that any negative consequences will be minor because they are just guests, preaching a time or two, and not even preaching about the errors in question. However, *coram Deo* outweighs consequences. Before God we must do our utmost to be consistent in the measurers we use, above all for the pulpit that proclaims his holy Word.

## A welcoming community

Still, isn't there another side to all of this? We can be so careful to uphold the doctrinal purity of our pulpit, but what about extending a hand of Christian love, warmth, and fellowship, also to those who may not have the correct view on baptism but who nevertheless love the Lord and strive with all their heart and soul to serve him according to his Word?

Yes, hospitality is important. In fact, it is a divine command (Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 4:9) and a particular responsibility of office bearers (1 Tim 3:2). However, two things are important here. First of all, although hospitality can take on many different forms, the key way to show hospitality is by opening the front door of your home to someone, not

the “door” to your pulpit. The pulpit is the place where the primary key of the kingdom is administered, not the place where hospitality is exercised.

Secondly, in Scripture being hospitable means showing friendship or love to a stranger. If someone holds to a teaching that contradicts God’s Word, true love compels us to work kindly and sincerely with that person to correct his misunderstanding, not to usher him up to the pulpit while he still holds to that error. True hospitality runs deep.

Summing up, yes, our churches must be welcoming, but the Lord has also given us the high calling to be “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). In this respect, perhaps the voice of John Calvin, a man who knew that “not all articles of doctrine are of the same sort” (*Institutes* 4.1.12), can guide us. He did not hesitate to declare that a denial of infant baptism is an “assault” on “the fortress of our faith” (4.16.22). May the Holy Spirit grant us all the same clarity and courage.



## Response to Dr. Jason Van Vliet

I’m grateful for Dr. Van Vliet’s willingness to engage me in this important discussion and for the diplomacy with which he does so. In this short rejoinder, I would like to respond to the points Dr. Van Vliet raises.

When it comes to terms such as “error” and “heresy,” first of all, I think we’re best helped by thinking of levels of discourse and then specifically biblical, confessional, and theological levels. Terms need not mean the same thing at each level and, in fact, there are many terms that mean something different at each level (e.g., regeneration).

When I in a previous exchange deployed the distinction between “heresy” and “error” I was thinking of these terms on the theological level. It is simply a fact, and I think Dr. Van Vliet grants this point, that a distinction must be made between wrong doctrine that *does not* jeopardize the authenticity of one’s Christian profession and wrong doctrine that *does*. I think it is significant that the rejection of infant baptism *per se* belongs to the former category.

Dr. Van Vliet argues, secondly, that even if one were to concede that the rejection of infant baptism is in a category distinct from the rejection of divine sovereignty, church members have vowed to reject “all heresies and errors” as have office-bearers who have also promised to “oppose, refute, and help prevent such errors.” For Dr. Van Vliet this implies that pulpit hospitality should not be shown to Baptist preachers.

I’m not convinced by the logic. I fail to see why “opposing, refuting, and helping prevent such errors” requires

excluding godly and faithful (Reformed) Baptist preachers from Reformed pulpits. In fact, I think that if one were fully to embrace Dr. Van Vliet’s logic, office-bearers ought to chastise members who read Baptist literature, listen to Baptist preachers, attend Ligonier and Banner of Truth conferences (which nearly always feature Baptist preachers), etc. Office-bearers should chastise the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary professors for recommending Baptist books.

For years the late Dr. R.C. Sproul invited Baptists preachers to speak at the Ligonier conferences he organized. He even invited a Baptist preacher (John MacArthur) to speak at his funeral. Must we conclude from these invitations that Dr. Sproul was negligent in opposing, refuting, and helping prevent the error of the rejection of infant baptism? The more reasonable conclusion is that Dr. Sproul was so convinced of infant baptism, he wasn’t threatened by Baptist preachers and that he was so fond of those godly and faithful Baptist colleagues that he wasn’t afraid to provide them with a platform to speak to those seeking instruction in Reformed theology.

Perhaps local consistories are, as we claim in our church polity, sufficiently astute theologically to supervise the “doctrine and conduct” of the pastors (CO, Art 22) and in this vein able to make prudent judgements about pulpit access for their respective congregations.

Bill De Jong



# The Jihad Threat in The Netherlands

Nobody likes bad news, especially if it disturbs the security that you feel living in the free West. Unfortunately, it appears that even with the conquest of most of ISIS territory in the Middle East, the threat of terrorist attacks by Islamic militants remains high in Europe. A case in point is the latest report from the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (September 26, 2018). It informs us that the terrorist threat is substantial at point 4, number 5 being the highest possible threat.

To think that a peaceful country like Holland, that bends over backwards to accommodate Islam, is under substantial threat from radical Islamists is disturbing. The Netherlands is in a bit of a fix because in spite of anti-terrorist activity and because of its ongoing accommodation to Islam, the country is, according to some observers, slowly undergoing Islamization.

The NCTV report admits that the influence of Salafism (a radical form of Islam) has been growing in The Netherlands and notes that “a segment of the Salafist movement advocates and legitimises active intolerance and antidemocratic activities, and consequently poses a threat to national security. There are also individuals within the Salafist movement who legitimise terrorist violence, typically veiled in religious terms.”

In this context, it is beneficial to listen to Judith Bergman of the Gatestone Institute, who has provided an overview of factors in this slow but steady Islamization process in Holland. The newly formed Muslim party, Denk, won three seats in the Dutch parliament. It has close ties with Turkey and “ran on a platform against the integration of immigrants into Dutch society (instead advocating ‘mutual acceptance,’ a euphemism for creating parallel Muslim societies).”

Bergman notes that “another facet of the increasing Islamization is the preaching of jihad in mosques. The Religious Affairs Directorate of the Republic of Turkey (Diyanet) distributes its official Friday sermons to Turkish

mosques across the world.” It is estimated that 140 mosques in Holland are affiliated with Diyanet. Dutch media have shown that at least one sermon subsequently preached in these mosques was about jihad and martyrdom. Such sermons can incite violence.

A further indication of increasing Islamization is that attacks against Jews has risen dramatically. A report by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service “listed 144 confirmed criminal offenses in 2017 involving hate crimes, including intimidation, vandalism, assault and incitement to hate or violence. Of those cases, 41 percent were ‘directed against Jews,’ who only account for 0.2 percent of the Dutch population.” In a November 2018 poll of Dutch Jews, “nearly half of them were afraid of identifying themselves as Jews, with 43% saying they take active steps to hide their Jewish identity and 52% saying anti-Semitism on the street has become more common.”

A final disquieting characteristic of Islamization “is the grooming and rape of underage girls, as seen for more than a decade in the UK. According to recent reports, ‘The number of Dutch victims of grooming gangs has risen sharply in recent years.’ It is estimated that rapergroomers force around 1,400 underage girls into sex-slavery every year.” These girls are given alcohol, drugs, and gifts and then blackmailed into sex-slavery. Research has shown that sixty percent of these rape-groomers are Muslim.

In spite of the evidence pointing to the challenges radical Islam poses, Dutch officialdom is largely in denial. The NCTV report, in spite of its own findings, nevertheless speaks of right-wing extremists with their “perceived Islamisation of the Netherlands.” But, is it really only a matter of perception or is it indeed reality? The recent nation-wide ban on face-covering veils in some public places suggests that the problem is being recognized as real.

Sources used: The report of the NCTV can be found on its website: <https://english.nctv.nl/> ; Judith Bergman, “Does the Netherlands Have a Problem?” on the Gatestone Institute website.





# Dutch Ethics Professor Finds Nashville Statement Extreme

The turbulent reception of the Nashville Statement in The Netherlands has underscored the degree of secularization and ungodliness in the land of our forefathers. What is even more disquieting is that this hostile reception also characterizes the response of many church leaders. It might be expected that they would be in agreement with a statement that defends the biblical view of marriage and sexuality in broad outline. Sadly, however, this is not the case.

In the *Nederlands Dagblad* of January 12, 2019, Dr. Ad de Bruijne, professor of ethics and spirituality at the Theological University in Kampen, wrote a column about the Nashville Statement. The basic point he makes in this article is that the Nashville Statement is an unhelpful, extreme, unnuanced, authoritarian reaction of fear to the growing acceptance of homosexuality in Christian churches. He notes that those who have signed the Nashville Statement in The Netherlands are largely from the “right-wing” of the Reformed community, by which he means those of a more experiential persuasion (e.g. *Christelijk Gereformeerd* and *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*). Hardly anyone from the NGK (*Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*) or RCN (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands – our Dutch sister churches) signed the Nashville Statement. De Bruijne writes that the reason for this is that in these churches they are intensely wrestling with homosexuality and gender-related issues.

In De Bruijne’s view, the Nashville Statement, with its unnuanced and extreme views (as he describes them), is avoiding the reality of the shift away from the traditional views on homosexuality and gender issues to a more accepting position in many orthodox Christian communities. And, therefore, the Nashville Statement is counterproductive and sticking one’s head in the sand (*struisvogelpolitiek*).

Instead of supporting a statement like the Nashville one, De Bruijne writes that we need to take our starting point in Christ and “then it will become clear that the shifts [away from the traditional views] do not automatically originate in

deformation and secularization.” He attempts to justify this shocking statement as follows. He says that many questions surrounding homosexuality and gender dysphoria are not adequately answered by the traditional view. He questions how we can judge so confidently about something which we have not come to deeply know and understand. He says that, for the Christian, nature (which would lead us to conclude that sex is for a man and a woman) does not have the final say.

De Bruijne goes on to make some very troubling and unclear statements connecting our future glorified body with homosexual issues. He writes:

Scripture also speaks of a future destination which transcends the current natural boundaries. From the time of the early church, Christians have realized that. Christians do not reason from nature but from Christ. And in Christ it is certainly about our creation, but also about our future destination. Then our natural body will become a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15). As bourgeois orthodox Christianity, we have scarcely thought through what that would mean for homosexuality and gender issues. Also for this reason, churches today need open discussion and not authoritarian adjurations.

What does De Bruijne mean with this? Is he speculating that the renewed creation will contain homosexual and gender dysphoric aspects? Is he using the term “spiritual body” to justify an approval of homosexuality and transgenderism? This would be absurd and unbiblical. Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Scripture tells us that the sexually immoral and homosexual offenders (without repentance) will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10). John writes in Revelation 22 that outside the new Jerusalem are the sexually immoral (Rev 22:15). We all struggle with sin. A kleptomaniac has trouble not stealing, but he resists this sinful inclination and knows that one day he will be totally liberated from this wrong impulse to steal. So too, one who struggles against an inclination to homosexual sin will one day be liberated in his

glorified and spiritual body, bearing “the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21).

De Bruijne fails to perceive that there is a spiritual war going on and that a powerful delusion is causing many to believe the lie rather than the truth (2 Thess 2:11-12). Jesus said that the world hated him because he testified that what it does is evil (John 7:7). The rough reception of the

Nashville Statement in The Netherlands is evidence of this spiritual war. A clear testimony of the truth of God’s Word in a wicked environment will provoke a hostile reaction because it does not like to hear that its actions are evil. May the Lord have mercy upon his church in The Netherlands and, as yet, use the Nashville Statement to wake up those caught in a deadly slumber.



## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Congratulations to the editor and team of the *Clarion* magazine for yet another lovely Year-End Issue. I am sure I am not alone in stating that every year again I look forward to the last issue of the year, with its varied articles and special features. The Year in Review is always a highlight, a wonderful way to show the Lord’s faithfulness to his people. The Year-End Issue of 2018 did not disappoint!

However, this year, one statement in particular left me “scratching my head” in puzzlement! I refer to the statement in the Year in Review article that, “In the first place Article 44 CO deals with classis, but nowhere does it say what the correct procedure is for a church to move from one classis to another, or that mutual consent is required.”

*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines classis as “1: a governing body in some Reformed churches corresponding to a presbytery, 2: the district governed by a classis.” *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “In the Presbyterian system: an ecclesiastical court or assembly above the consistory and below the synod consisting of the elders or pastors from each parish or congregation within a given area.” (In Reformed churches, the hierarchical set-up is not espoused, so we would call the meeting of classis a “broader assembly.”) It is clear that classis is defined as a geographic area which is governed by a body of (elders and ministers) believers for the good of the church in general. That makes sense.

What does not make any sense at all is a church leaving a classis without physically leaving the area in which that classis operates. That is simply against the entire intent and purpose of the set-up of Article 44 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed federation. The physical location of Blessings Christian Church is downtown Hamilton; therefore, they belong in the classis of Classis Ontario West. To arbitrarily move to another classis without physically moving is neither healthy nor advisable. This sort of action polarizes the churches, in which like-minded congregations then may ultimately form an entire classis, governing themselves in a manner that is remarkably different from the rest of the federation.

The same goes for the dissolution of church boundaries. This is a practice that echoes pre-Liberation activities in The Netherlands, which facilitated the schism of the federation. Instead of having healthy congregations with a variety of (acceptable) differences among believers, you get congregations of like-minded believers who ultimately take their church down a different path than the rest of the federation.

The Church Order is the issue at stake here. By agreeing together and signing (as all Canadian Reformed churches do) the Church Order, proper order and governance is maintained in the federation. As soon as one or more congrega-

tions begin to blur the lines and meanings of the articles, the Church Order becomes a moot document. Historically, the need to exactly and minutely lay the Church Order out in small details was not thought to be necessary, because the language of the Church Order was always deemed understandable in the past, as a clear mutual agreement. However, if practices are initiated because the Church Order is not clear enough, then perhaps it would be incumbent upon our consistories to draft a new, clearer, and more detailed Church Order in order to prevent questionable headstrong practices from occurring in the future.

“‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up” (1 Cor 10:23).

*Respectfully submitted,  
Thea Heyink, Burlington, ON*

## Response

Dear Thea,

Thank you for your letter. I am glad that our Year-End Issue lived up to its expectations.

And then there were those things that left you “scratching your head” that relate to Blessings Church moving to a different classis and to the matter of church boundaries.

On the matter of moving to a different classis, you state that this goes “against the entire intent and purpose of the set-up of Article 44 of the Church Order.” Where in Article 44 does it speak about intent and purpose? The Article speaks about composition, frequency, cancellation, presiding over, what the president should ask, choosing delegates to regional synod, and to two ministers serving in the same church. Nowhere is mention made of a church moving to a different classis, and how it should go about doing that.

Now, that may be stated somewhere in the classical regulations (although I doubt it), but it is not in the Church Order as such. Whether the action that Blessings took was warranted or wise is not for me to judge. My point is that the Church Order simply does not regulate this matter. Should the Church Order be changed to do so? That is up to the churches, via general synod, to decide.

Oh, and as for Blessings “belonging to Classis Ontario West,” I am not sure about that. I look at a map of Ontario

and I can just as easily say that it belongs with the churches of Burlington as they are all close to the lakeshore. Furthermore, I look at the Brampton church and I wonder what it is doing in Classis Northern Ontario. Should it not be in Classis Central Ontario?

As for the matter of church boundaries, again no mention is made of them in the Church Order. What this means is that it is up to churches in close proximity to one another to decide whether or not such boundaries would be beneficial. If the answer is “Yes,” then they should sit down together and decide on where to draw the lines. Furthermore, once they decide on such boundaries, they should also maintain them.

Yes, and frequently here is where the system breaks down. In areas where boundaries exist, church councils all too often have to deal with “boundary issues,” that is, members wanting to go to a different church in the same area and federation for a wide variety of reasons. This takes up a lot of precious pastoral time and in the end attestations are still issued to churches on the other side of the boundary line. In addition, churches that receive attestations from so-called “boundary jumpers” are then blamed for accepting them. What is forgotten is that the responsibility lies with the church council issuing the attestation in the first place.

Having grown up in Ontario, I well remember the boundary battles between different churches and the frustration this created. At the same time, I am thankful that throughout my active ministry in Alberta and British Columbia, I was privileged to serve in churches that did not create or patrol boundaries. Was it always perfect? No! Did it sometimes “look” messy? Yes! Over time, however, I became convinced that the health and well-being of a church does not depend on geographical boundaries and their enforcement, but on faithful office bearers who know the people in their wards and minister diligently to their needs.

At bottom, we all want neat and tidy solutions to our church and member issues; however, as long as the church exists in this broken and sinful world, the struggles will go on and the prayers of God’s people will need to go up.

*James Visscher*

*Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.  
Submissions need to be less than one page in length.*



# Clarion Kids

# The Ascension

# Luke 24:50-53

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he spent forty days visiting his disciples and teaching them. He explained how his resurrection from the dead fulfilled all the promises of the Old Testament, and all the things he had told them during his time on earth. When this time was finished, Jesus blessed his disciples. He told them to go and make disciples of all nations, preaching everything that he had taught them. Then he was taken up into heaven to be with God. He died for our sins, and ascended into heaven with the promise that he soon would send his Holy Spirit.

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and colour this picture!



## Double Puzzle

Unscramble the clues to solve the final word.

LSDCSIPE

4

TANMESTET

A horizontal number line with 11 equally spaced tick marks, representing integers from 0 to 10. Below the tick marks, the numbers 6, 1, and 5 are written at the 6th, 1st, and 5th positions from the left, respectively.

PIESRSMO

A horizontal number line with tick marks at every integer from 0 to 10. The numbers 8, 7, and 2 are written below the tick marks at those positions.

CAIGE HNT

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

by Emily Nijenhuis

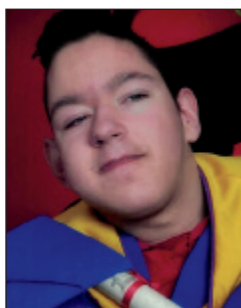
## Word Search

S	A	S	V	C	X	G	N	R	H
E	S	E	D	O	L	E	P	P	D
S	C	H	W	I	V	T	R	I	F
I	E	U	W	A	I	E	S	F	O
M	N	K	E	K	A	C	V	Q	R
O	S	H	R	C	I	F	T	B	T
R	I	B	H	P	F	K	J	L	Y
P	O	I	L	S	P	I	R	I	T
T	N	E	M	A	T	S	E	T	E
G	S	G	N	I	H	C	A	E	T

Ascension  
Heaven  
Spirit

Disciples  
Preaching  
Teaching

Forty  
Promises  
Testament



## Remembering the life of James Boone

*James would have celebrated his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday this coming March. This was written by his sister, Breanne Boone.*

### James Boone

March 10, 1996 - December 20, 2018

James Boone was born in Calgary, Alberta on March 10, 1996. He was the firstborn to Tony Boone and Betty Groenwold and was the big brother of his two younger siblings, Breanne and Lucas. James was born with a severe case of Spina Bifida; it was at the top of his spine, which meant that not all the nerves were connected to his brain. As a result, he was unable to speak and could not walk; he was in a wheelchair for all of his life. He was very capable of following in on conversations and he would either lift his left or right hands to say yes or no; but if he couldn't do that then he could blink for you if you asked him a question. James loved to laugh and smile, and that is the one thing that many people have always said about him and what I will always cherish of him the most. James was a member of the Canadian Reformed Church of Calgary; although James couldn't sing along in church or worship the same way we do, he definitely enjoyed his time spent there. He loved coming in and being greeted and talked to by all different members of the church. James touched many hearts and will be missed dearly, and we are thankful that his pain and suffering is now over and he is with the Lord.

## March Birthdays

- 3 TREVOR HOFKINK will be 41**  
14407 McQueen Road, Edmonton, AB T5N 3L3
- 9 DAVID RAWSON will be 57**  
c/o Twin Oaks  
3217 Twin Oaks Crescent, Burlington, ON L7M 3A8
- 12 GERRY EELHART will be 57**  
c/o Mrs. Grace Eelhart  
# 120 13425-57 Street, Emmanuel Home  
Edmonton, AB T5A 2G1
- 13 JOHN VANWYNGAARDEN will be 41**  
c/o Beacon Home  
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8
- 14 TINEILLE VANROOTSELAAR will be 23**  
219 Lock Street W, Dunnville, ON N1A 1V2
- 14 LISA ALKEMA will be 38**  
c/o Harbour Home, 42 Spadara Drive  
Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3, email: lhalkema@gmail.com
- 15 JIM VANDERHEIDEN will be 60**  
c/o Beacon Home  
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8

Congratulations to all of you celebrating a birthday in March! May the Lord bless you in the coming year and give you all you need to serve and honour him.

We think of the Boone family and wish them strength and comfort in the loss of their son, brother, and friend. We can be so thankful for the comfort we have that he is now at peace in the Lord's care.

## A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

*If there are any address or other changes that I need to be aware of please let me know as soon as possible.*

**Rachel Vis**

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